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ABSTRACT

Through wilderness stewardship programs, service projects, or trail crews, college outdoor programs can help land management agencies with their maintenance needs and provide student participants with rewarding service learning opportunities. Trail crews are usually composed of volunteer outdoor enthusiasts who take part in a multitude of technical and nontechnical work projects. In particular, trail crews are heavily utilized to reopen badly damaged trails after harsh winters. This paper uses Penn State University's Outdoor Program as a model to explore the steps in developing a trail crew component to a college outdoor program. These steps include: (1) establishing a solid working relationship with a local trail organization, state or local park, or state forest; (2) locating and securing a sufficient number of high quality trail tools (borrowing tools from agencies, buying the most needed tools over time, soliciting donations from local stores); (3) developing funding (avoiding costs, grant writing, fee-based workshops); (4) developing safety guidelines; and (5) staff training. Included is a general outline of the training requirements for apprentice leaders, assistant trip leaders, trip leaders, and trail crew instructors in Penn State's Outdoor Program. (SV)

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Trail Crews:
Developing a Service Component to Your Program

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Rob Jones

1

Abstract

Wilderness stewardship programs, service projects, or trails crews are a wonderful way for your program to help land management agencies accomplish their back-logged maintenance needs, and in turn, provide your participants with an incredibly rewarding service learning opportunity. By developing relationships with land management agencies, your organization will be viewed not only as a user but as an asset, an ally, and a concerned motivated solution to "the problem". A service project is not a novel idea and many programs have been implementing service components in their programs for years. At Penn State University's Outdoor Program, a fully student-run organization, they have taken the concept a step further and have fully developed the trail crew into an activity area of its own that includes instructional courses, weekend overnight trips, and full integration into the Wilderness Instructor Leadership Development (WILD) program; the staff training branch of Penn State's program.

Wilderness Stewardship

Over the years, stewardship in the outdoors has become a burgeoning topic. Groups ranging from local trail organizations to high school clubs have developed an interest in service to the land. As the number of adventure based outdoor programs continues to grow and participant levels swell, it is imperative that we, as outdoor program administrators and dedicated students, begin to incorporate service components into our programs. This paper will explore the nature of developing trail crews, service learning events, and wilderness stewardship programs in collegiate level outdoor programs. More specifically, the authors will explore the "nuts and bolts" of developing a trail crew including developing agency relationships, securing tools, and developing staff training.

What is a trail crew?

The first question that may come to mind when beginning a stewardship program is "What does a trail crew actually do?" A trail crew is usually composed of a group of volunteer outdoor enthusiasts (although many paid crews do exist) that conduct a multitude of technical and non-technical work projects. Trail crews are heavily utilized to reopen badly damaged trails after harsh winters when blow-downs cover the trail and water from the winter thaw erodes essential trail structures. Trail crews, armed with chainsaws, bow saws, and digging tools hit the trails to clear the winter damage and reconstruct eroded trails. One of the greatest attributes to trail work is that anyone can lend a hand. A wide range of projects and skills enables anyone ranging from the rookie first timer to the

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veteran "trail dawg" to help improve our nations' trail systems. Projects may include rock and timber work, revegetation, brushing (clearing brush), blazing, step construction, building water bars and other drainage structures, assembling cribbing, as well as the "science" of reading terrain to design and construct new trails.

Starting a Trail Crew Program

Developing a trail crew component to your outdoor program, as with any new program, will take time, effort and a clear plan of action. At the beginning, developing a trail crew may seem like an immense task, especially if you have never been involved with trail work before. To most peoples' surprise, it is not as overwhelming as it seems. In this paper, we have used the Penn State Outdoor Program as a model to explore the steps necessary to create a respected and sought after presence in your local trail work community.

Contacts and Agency Support

Establishing a solid working relationship with your agency contacts can be an incredibly rewarding experience for your program and participants. It is also one of the most important steps to developing your trail crew program. Where to begin? The best advice is to seek out your local trail organizations, state parks, and state forests and let them know that you are interested in working with them. Trail organizations often have their own service days where folks can come out and volunteer for the day or weekend. Some trail associations may offer specialized training in trail maintenance, tool safety, or chainsaw use. In the same respect, park and forest services are usually delighted to have volunteers roaming the trails performing trail work. Most parks and forests are so short staffed that volunteer workers are as good as gold.

You may also find an opportunity to establish a relationship with either a trail association or local park to "adopt" a section of trail. This works much like our nation's adopt-a-highway program where individuals or groups commit to oversee a section of trail; keeping it clear and making sure the blazes are in place. Most "overseers" perform the general trail maintenance while the agency organizes the larger projects that require larger crews and more money.

Tools

A second crucial component to developing a trail crew is locating and securing a sufficient number of high quality trail tools. There are several ways that you can secure the appropriate tools for trail work. The first angle is to borrow tools from groups such as local trail associations, parks, and forests. Most local agencies are more than happy to loan out their tools to your program especially when they are most likely sitting idle in their tool shed or maintenance building. Since many digging and "grubbing" tools used for trail work also double as fire fighting tools, it may also be useful to approach your local fire fighting community that is armed to fight forest fires.

To help maintain and enhance a working relationship with your agency partner, keep a few things in mind when borrowing agency tools: (1) always return them how they were given to you (if not in better shape), (2) sharpen the tools, (3) clean them thoroughly, (4) lubricate the tools if necessary, (5) note anything that was broken, and (6) always thank the owner profusely.

The second angle for securing trail tools is to actually purchase your tools. Most collegiate communities, however, struggle with inadequate budgets and purchasing tools is a low priority. One of the best pieces of advice would be to acquire your tool cache slowly: piece by piece, tool by tool. Whenever you can allocate fifty or a hundred dollars, make the investment into a polaski or a new saw. It may take a few years, but think about what tools are used the most and focus on acquiring those first. In a few short years, you will acquire enough tools to begin to outfit your own trail crew events.

The third angle for securing tools is to solicit donations from your local business community. Solicit donations from local hardware stores and large chain hardware stores such as Lowes, Home Depot, and Ace Hardware. The large chains often have programs that allow for the donation of tools and other goods to non-profit organizations. Once again, be creative, and remember that it never hurts to politely ask. They may say no, but the reality is, many times they say yes!

Funding

Although a seemingly impossible hurdle, a collegiate trail crew can be established without generating revenue to support itself. As described previously, establishing good agency relationships can mean a world of difference. An agency may provide you with tools, personpower, support, and will sometimes even provide your crew with lodging. Major transportation costs such as the rental of vehicles can be avoided by utilizing a carpool. Once you have established some projects and begun to utilize your agency relationships, you can move forward with becoming self-sufficient and self-sustaining.

Another angle to obtain funding for your trail crew is to investigate and write appropriate grant proposals. Large organizations such as Eastern Mountain Sports, Backpacker, or other large corporate chains award grants for various reasons on an annual basis. For example, the Penn State Outdoor Program recently received a grant from EMS to help support their trail maintaining efforts. This grant was designed specifically to support programs that are vested in wilderness stewardship and giving back to the land.

Another step towards sustaining the Penn State Outdoor Program's Trail Crew, has been the development of a fee-based instructional workshop. This workshop is composed of one classroom session followed by a full weekend of hands on project experience. This instructional course differs from an average weekend trail crew outing and is focused on teaching the techniques of trail construction and maintenance. The revenue generated from the instructional course is then reinvested into supporting the Trail Crew.

Safety

Safety is the number one priority in all of Penn State Outdoor Program's activities. It is important that your trail crew operates with a set of standard operating guidelines and safety policies. For example, Penn State uses the following policies: leather work boots must be worn at all times; hard hats are required; staff to participant ratios will not exceed 5:1; long pants and shirts will be worn at all times; gloves are mandatory when sharpening tools; chainsaws will only be run by those leaders or instructors that have completed and/or obtained an external chainsaw training or certification. A good source for safety

guidelines and overall trail work skills, is the Student Conservation Association's trail construction and maintenance book entitled *Lightly on the Land* published by the Mountaineer's. As always, safety should be the number one priority when working on the trail.

Staff Training

In the past five years, Penn State's Outdoor Program has grown in size from a membership base of two hundred, to over a thousand. In response to this accelerated growth in membership, a corresponding growth in staff was also needed. A major focus of the Penn State program became developing and enhancing staff training to develop the consistent quality of instructors and trip leaders. Arising from this focus, is a program known today as W.I.L.D.(Wilderness Instructor Leadership Development). This staff training program provides the organizational structure to continually produce quality outdoor leaders.

Following, is a general outline of the steps needed to attain Trail Crew Instructor status in Penn State's Outdoor Program. The first four steps of the process are standard for each of the Outdoor Program's activity areas including trail crew, backpacking, rock climbing, canoeing, kayaking, and cross-country skiing. After the initial requirements are met, each training becomes activity specific.

Wilderness Instructor Leadership Development Program (WILD)

Apprentice

1) Application, interview, and "hiring" process
2) Apprentice approval by the Activity Coordinator

Assistant Trip Leader

1) Staff Orientation Day
2) W.I.L.D. Weekend
   a) Outdoor Instruction Workshop
   b) Wilderness Medicine Workshop (also must hold a minimum of CPR and Wilderness First Aid)
3) Participation in Work Skills Weekend (specific to trail work skills)
4) Review and approval by Tail Crew Coordinator to become an Assistant Trip Leader.

Trip Leader

1) Assist on a minimum of two trail crew trips.
2) Review and approval by Tail Crew Coordinator and Program Director to become a Trip Leader.

Instructor

1) Lead a minimum of one trail crew trip.
2) Assist on a minimum of one trail crew instructional course.
3) Review and approval by Tail Crew Coordinator and Program Director to become an Instructor

Staff training is an extremely important aspect of running a safe trail crew or wilderness stewardship program. Staff training allows for the solidarity of policies and procedures and provides your trail crew program with an air of professionalism. Although the training process may seem long, most new staff complete the program in two semesters. The Outdoor Program also keeps a W.I.L.D. documentation folder for each staff member that includes written documentation of their staff profile, medical certifications, status record, involvement record, W.I.L.D. application, and staff evaluations from trips and courses.

Conclusion

Wilderness stewardship and trail crew programs are a necessity for the future of our outdoor programs. It is a harsh reality to realize and come to terms with, although we teach and preach leave-no-trace outdoor skills, we still have a major destructive impact on our environment. As exemplified through Penn State's Trail Crew Program, creating and enhancing a service component in your program is not as difficult as it seems and is a rewarding and fulfilling undertaking for your program, staff, and participants.